

comfort in the holding on just tight enough by 10pintsofsacrifice

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Summary:

Will copes. Not very well, apparently.

comfort in the holding on just tight enough

Author's Note:

warnings for graphic descriptions of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, dissociation and nausea/vomiting. wrt the minor body horror tag, it's referring to the usual, aka the black vomit motif.

every time I write about Will it's...sad? sorry ya'll please tread carefully!!

When you were just twelve years old, you had your first and last brush with death (though you'd...call it more of a collision, if you're being completely honest) and if it hadn't been for your mom and Hopper you're certain you would have been a dead man. You still have no clue what it was that made its way down your throat. The idea of it terrifies you enough on its own, so you can't imagine what it was like for your mom and Hopper to see it up close, for Hopper to actually have to pull the damn thing out of you with a hiss, for your mom to watch on in horror as it slithered away. You don't want to know what it was.

There's a lot of things you don't like to think about. Once you'd come upon the quarry in that place, you'd felt so hopeless and tired at that point that you'd tried to throw yourself over the cliff-side. You got to the edge and had one foot off the ground when you felt something pull you back. You couldn't explain it, and you still can't, but you suppose you're thankful. You suppose that even if you'd been able to, you would have just become food for that monster. Like hell you were going to let it take your life from you after everything else it'd stolen.

You try not to be bitter about being alive and well, because it feels like you're being horribly ungrateful and even more of a disappointment, especially when you know the trouble they went through to save you. You try to channel that guilt into your art and poetry and even shaky music, but nothing seems to be able to relieve the pressure it has on your chest, so you just hold it in, push it down at the appropriate moments, disallow yourself to feel it in hopes that it leaves.

What kind of kid are you, if you're not even happy that you made it out of the Upside Down *alive*, and that your mom and Hopper risked their lives to save yours? You don't understand how you can be like this; you could have died easily but you didn't, they could have left you in there but they *didn't*, people could've given up hope but they didn't. You just don't understand the cold apathy you feel sometimes, or the occasional feelings of wanting to sleep and never having to wake up, or the strong urge to snort when yet another stranger calls you a miracle child. No one understands, but you know you shouldn't feel this way.

As if there wasn't already enough wrong with you, before all of this happened and you were just Will Byers. Now you'll never just be Will Byers, nothing will ever be normal again, and more people know your face and name than you feel comfortable with and you were already Hawkins' freak but now you're in some weird tragic spotlight.

You don't want to be different like this anymore.

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When you woke up, blinking away sleep and darkness, the first things you saw were your mom and Jonathan. They'd looked world-weary and older, like more than just a week has passed since you disappeared. It doesn't comfort you to know you have the same look, this ancient fatigue in your eyes, all at once so much older but not older at all, and it's a very disorienting feeling. You barely register the hum of the machines in the background or the steady drip of the IV in your arm, and instead focus on your family's overjoyed faces and tears.

When you see Jonathan's bandaged hand, you weakly ask if he's okay. He laughs, saying after all you've been through your first concern is his hand, and he hunches over you, and you can feel his sobs.

You can see the bags under your mom's eyes, ones that had always been present but were considerably darker after the week she's had. She looks at you with all the love in the world - like nothing could ever hurt you again, not as long as she had a say and at the moment it's enough to make you believe it. She held your face in her hands

and cried, and had you not been so exhausted you would have cried too. When Jonathan left the room, you barely had time to register it before you were ambushed by three very familiar voices, and three very familiar bodies. You were too weak to do much else than laugh, patting their backs, coughing and adjusting the tubes in your nose when they pulled away. They go into theatrics - about the girl they met. About the things she did.

Your eyes feel hot, and you mumble that the Demogorgon got you. Like you'd said that first day after your campaign, when you'd told Mike you'd rolled a seven. Mike's eyes flash, something like sadness and something like grieving when he tells you that they know. He tells you that she killed it, that it's gone and is never coming back. You can see it in their eyes, the loss of this girl and the joy of having you back confusingly mixed.

This is the first time you feel guilt - that to bring you back she had to disappear - and for a terrible fleeting moment you wonder what would've happened if you'd stayed in the Upside Down instead.

You know that realistically they don't prefer her over you. That isn't to say that she didn't have any meaning to them at all, because even *you* feel something akin to grief when you think about her, being the one that saved you whether indirectly or not. If it weren't for her no one would've known where you ended up, and you'd probably still be there right this second: it's a terrifying thought and you banish it quickly. You're still thankful to her despite not knowing her, though.

It's difficult to think about anything related to the hell you've been through, but you suppose if there was one good thing it was that girl telling you to hold on. They tell you her name is Eleven and yes, they mean like the number - but they said they called her El, because it would be weird to call her Eleven, even though she was weird too like the rest of them, but in a very different and very sci-fi way. It's not every day that you meet a girl with mind powers.

When everything goes quiet for a few moments, and you can only hear the distant beeps and calls of other patients, Mike gives you a small smile. He takes your hand in his and the first thing you notice is that his is so warm and yours is *freezing*, and if he minds he doesn't tell you, and he presses your hand to his chest and bows his head,

muttering something you don't quite hear the first time around.

When he brings his head back up his eyes are filled with tears, and his chest is shuddering with barely-restrained sobs. He tells you that he was so scared, so goddamn *scared* that he would never see you again. You see Dustin swipe his arm over his face, and Lucas rubs a hand over his, and your heart breaks just a little bit more, more than it already had when you saw your family. This *is* your family, because you know that they're a part of it too.

You want to be able to cry with them, but you're so exhausted that it's not happening. Are you coming off as angry or maybe ungrateful? Are they waiting for you to burst into tears and be unable to stop? Shouldn't you be doing something other than *laying here*?

You manage to tell them that you're sorry, for causing this much panic and heartache. Mike stares at you, and with a jump of his shoulders he laughs. It's kind of hollow and makes you a little nervous, because it's also sort of hysterical. Not really a laugh at all, you think. But he shakes his head and tells you no, please don't be sorry because there's no reason, and if anything he's sorry that they couldn't get to you sooner than they did. It strikes you that maybe your friends and family feel guilty for being unable to save you, and a cold heavy dread settles in the pit of your stomach.

There's too much to think about right now. You just want to go back to sleep, back to dark dreamless nothingness, back to not having to feel anything.

You can feel Mike's rapid heartbeat under your palm - you think maybe you can feel the ache in him here, too - but finally your eyes sting with the acid-sharp prick of tears. They fall over the bridge of your nose before you can stop them, weeping silently from too much practice. Mike looks down at you with wide eyes, and he makes a soft strangled noise, taking in a deep shaky breath, and if you look at his eyes he looks shattered. You used to cry loudly and admittedly while it was ugly at least you made noise. He takes your face in his hands and presses his forehead to yours, and you weakly wrap your arms around his middle.

Dustin and Lucas pile on as well, and none of you are dry-eyed, which is comforting in a weird way that you can't explain, but you

don't think about it and just let yourself melt into the warm safe embraces of your best friends, something warming up deep inside of you.

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You can't handle the quarry, not after knowing that's where your "body" was found and the time in the Upside Down where you'd tried to drown. It's not like you were there often, but now you can't handle being there at all, which makes you feel dumb. There's a lot of things, places, words and sounds that you can't handle anymore because the flashbacks come almost instantly.

There's the nightmares, which come even when you're completely awake and alert, and sometimes hours pass before you're able to disengage yourself from the false reality of them. Sometimes you forget that you have a body, that you're a human with a name and a heart. Sometimes you start questioning if anything around you is even real. You think there has to be something wrong with you to feel this way, which after what happened is obvious, but you're not sure why trauma has to be like this. You're frustrated. You're scared.

Your mom offers to bring you to therapy and only relents when you tell her you can't handle that. You do end up on antidepressants and pills to combat insomnia and anxiety. While they help sometimes you just feel even *more* alienated.

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The flashes of anger come fleetingly and echo through you for only a few moments before they pass like thunder after lightning, but they're nonetheless unsettling. You're never angry at anyone in particular but you're still so angry that it scares you, makes your hands shake and your teeth grind, makes you want to destroy something or at least throw a branch as far as you can. Taking a fallen branch and cracking it against a tree in your yard works just as well, you suppose. It's loud and comforting and you're not strong enough to break anything. One time Jonathan found you in the midst of one of these attacks, howling and chest heaving with breathlessness, not at all noticing the tears on your cheeks. He didn't say anything, just wrapped you in his arms and whispered that it's

okay, that *you're* going to be okay, and he didn't flinch as you feebly beat your fists against his chest.

You had been so out of it that you hadn't noticed the bloody scrapes on your palms, and instead of telling your mom Jonathan cleaned you up. He didn't force you to explain, didn't scold you for it, didn't even ask you why, just kissed your forehead and held you in his arms, rocking you back and forth while you cry it out. He tells you that he might not completely understand, but if you ever want to talk about anything he's always there to listen; he asked if you wanted to sleep in his room tonight, and like a little kid you took him up on his offer.

He was there when you woke up at 3 A.M. wheezing and clutching your chest, heart beating a million miles a minute and a nausea so strong you felt like there was an ocean inside you. When you start gagging, he tucks his arms under your knees and around your shoulder, rushing you to the bathroom despite being sleepy and confused, because his older brother concern conquers any other feeling or fear he might have, and he tells you to hold on, because the bathroom is just down the hall, and you press your face against his chest and shudder.

You end up on your hands and knees, the tiles cold and sharp underneath your clammy palms. While you lurch and gag Jonathan wipes the sweat from your forehead and brushes your bangs from your face.

You throw up something murky and black and it's gross, but it's all you've been throwing up since you got back. You feel Jonathan's hand stiffen on the back of your head, but he doesn't move away from you or say anything, just pets through your hair and murmurs, and you try to focus on the hum of his voice in the background.

When your body finally relaxes, you lay your cheek against the toilet bowl and cry.

He scoots next to you and pulls you into his lap. He doesn't mind that you're sweaty and gross and crying like you always do, he just wants you to be comfortable and if that means he's holding you then it means he's holding you.

You don't know how long you sit there with your eyes squeezed shut against the artificial light, Jonathan rocking you and singing softly. Just when you stop crying, something else crosses your mind, and you just start crying all over again. By the time you actually stop for real, you can't breathe through your nose whatsoever, and your eyes are so sore you don't even want them open anymore.

He doesn't bother waiting for you to stand and just lifts you again. When you're both in bed again he faces you instead of away, his arm over your waist. It's kind of like when you were little, when you'd watch a scary movie and be afraid to sleep alone, and your mom would let you sleep in her bed and would hold you just like this. It's a soft warm feeling, one that settles in your heart, flows from your chest to your stomach and toes, and manages to calm you down a little bit.

You end up falling asleep some time around 3:30. Jonathan doesn't leave your side the whole time, and though you feel bad there's nowhere else you want to be.

You don't think you could've slept alone tonight anyway, and you know despite your own guilt that Jonathan doesn't mind, and sometimes only your brother can really help, though you love your mom dearly and appreciate everything she does, but there are some things you don't want to tell her.

You suppose that maybe when you're ready you should talk to him, even though you have no real idea when that will be.

Whenever it is, you know he'll be there to listen and help you if he can.

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You don't even know what time it is when you wander into the bathroom severely dissociated. You just know that it was dark and extremely late because your mom and Jonathan had gone to bed hours ago, but you haven't been able to sleep yet and you've just been drawing. You take a look at yourself in the mirror and the thing that scares you the most is that you don't recognize yourself, you don't know who you're staring at, and when you look down at your

hands you have a hard time believing they're yours.

You think maybe that's what drives you to tear apart that shaving razor in the drawer, the clean blades falling in your hand, the white-hot flash of silver dashing across your forearm before you know what's happening. Your stomach tugs strangely with the sting of the cut of clean metal, the blood beading up and shining in the bathroom light, and you don't know how long you lean against the counter, but when you come to the blood is mostly coagulated and is hard to wipe away.

You put a band-aid over it and shove the blades in a spare notebook on your desk.

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Mike looks as tired as you feel most days, like he doesn't know how to be happy anymore, or at the very least doesn't have the energy to pretend. His smiles hardly ever reach his eyes. His laughs sound a little hollow lately, and you don't think you're the only one that's noticed, because sometimes even Lucas leans over and asks if he's okay, and he always grins and waves all of the concern and worried questions off. You know enough about yourself, know enough about doing the same thing to know that he was lying, but you don't know how to even approach him about it; admittedly you want to but you don't know how, knowing that you wanted to be as gentle as you could with him, but still needing a way to start something like that.

You'd rather worry about anyone else than yourself as it is.

That's not why you want to help Mike though. You know that there's things he has to deal with too, things that you don't understand. You weren't around when Eleven came into Mike's, Dustin's and Lucas' lives, but you can see the impact her departure has taken on all of them. Mike seems to be taking it the hardest, the shadows under his eyes getting darker with each passing day and this deeply felt sadness hovering around him, his smiles thin and near breaking. You just want to hold him and take away all of his pain, which you know realistically could never be done but damn it you still want to, and you just want to see him bright and happy again like he used to be.

(You know how it feels to not be yourself, more than anyone, and you're so used to feeling it that you can see when someone falls into the same pattern, the awkward un-knowing of one's self, the difficulty in coming back and *oh God oh God who am I who am I*.)

You don't even know how to help him right now, when you can barely help yourself. It's been God knows how many weeks since you started releasing the fire inside you through your blood. No one can even tell because you were always one to hide in sweaters, flannels and hoodies. If you can't help yourself, you can't possibly expect to help someone else. It doesn't mean that you don't want to try anyway.

The two of you are good at pretending nothing's wrong. You can smile and laugh and tell jokes, and sometimes you cry and get sick but that's expected. When you're alone, your scars line all the way up to your shoulders from the base of your wrist, and no one can see it because you won't let them.

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You can save yourself from drowning if you know how to swim.

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Then again maybe you've forgotten how, lately.

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You and Mike end up alone one day. Dustin's going to his grandma's and Lucas is on vacation; neither of you can really stand the silence so you both end up in Mike's basement. You know that your hands are shaking and your stomach is rolling, and you know what that means but you're trying to fight it down.

You freeze on the stairs though, because when you look down you meet the eyes of a certain black figuring standing still on the table. You feel your knees go weak and your chest start to ache, unable to catch your breath as fast as you can exhale, and before you know it you're sinking to your knees.

Mike nearly bumps into you when he opens the door, and when he

sees you hunched over on the stairs gasping he immediately rushes into action. He tells you to focus on his voice and to trust him. You want to so badly but you can't seem to make your body follow the commands your brain sends out. Instead you end up hyperventilating, gasping loudly with wide eyes, slamming your fists weakly into the carpet trying desperately to get air into your lungs. Mike's voice is shaky with the faint echoes of panic but he tries his best.

"Will, hey," he murmurs while lifting your arms above your head. He looks you in the eye and you're both seeing and unseeing. Like you're half between this world and the Upside Down. "I need you to try to breathe with me."

Your nod ends up being jerky. He counts for you quietly and carefully, tangling his fingers with yours and holding your arms up by holding your hands.

"That's it, good," he says, nodding. "You're doing very good Will. I need you to know that I'm right here - you're not back there and you won't ever be, the monster is dead."

With a strangled-sounding gasp you relax, falling forward into Mike's chest with your hands still intertwined. You feel the big heavy sobs coming on before they happen, so you're able to hide your face before things get ugly and you end up scaring someone else because you act like you're alright but you're *not*.

He lets go of one of your hands to wrap an arm around your back, pulling you closer to him as he folds over you. You can feel him shaking, know by the coldness in the pit of your stomach that he's crying too: why do you have to be like this, why do you have to make him sad, all you ever do is worry people or scare them. You hold him back tightly like he's the only thing grounding you, and if you're being honest he probably is. He holds onto you just as tightly, so there's comfort in you not being the only desperate one.

You stay like that for awhile. When you're both finally all cried out, you walk down the stairs slowly and leaning into each other. When you reach the foot of the stairs you stand for a bit before he's leading you, gently as if he's afraid if he tugs too hard he'll hurt you, and you

realize after a few moments that he's leading you to The Fort. You can't stifle the very soft gasp you let out. You know how this makes him feel.

He sits down and closes his eyes, breathing in deep and letting it out slow. He looks more peaceful than he has in months. But also so sad.

"You're allowed to be sad," you tell him softly, massaging his knuckles with your thumb. "You don't have to pretend you don't miss her. It's okay if you're sad, you have every right to be and it wouldn't be wrong of you, okay?"

He nods. Blinks rapidly. He leans over then, pressing his face into the space between your shoulder and jaw.

You bite your lip when you feel the warm wetness of his tears, trying hard not to start crying again yourself.

You wonder how many times he's cried alone. You wonder how many times he's let himself be vulnerable like this and be open like this.

You get the feeling he's a lot like you, then. The thought process that if you ignore it, then you don't really have to feel it, and it's like it never even happened in the first place. You've learned first hand that it doesn't work that way, and you think Mike has too, the way he's sobbing and muttering unintelligible apologies.

He's sorry. He's sorry. He's sorry. It breaks your heart to hear this, to think that he blames himself for anything. You tend to fall into guilt but even you know nothing was your fault. You understand though - saying and thinking that is a lot easier than believing it, and there are times where it breaks through, and all you can think about is the things you didn't do and the things you didn't say. All of the if onlys and the I should haves and

why didn't Is, swirling around your head and squeezing your heart. You really get it, more than he might realize, and all you can whisper is that it's not his fault, it was never his fault.

Mike tells you that it's not yours either. You make a soft noise and swallow hard. When he sits up, his face red, you hold his face in your

hands and press your foreheads together. You run your hand through his hair, brushing the tears off his cheeks with your free hand.

He closes his eyes, leaning into your touch instead of away. His face is warm and soft in your palm, and you try to let go of your own hurt for a minute.

Your heart aches for him. You might not be doing so well, but neither is Mike, and maybe the two of you could try to help each other, if nothing else.

You startle slightly when he lays a hand on your wrist. You look down, and your stomach sinks with dread; your sleeve's rolled up. It's too late for you to tug it down and hope he doesn't see.

You open and close your mouth, unsure of what to even tell him.

Of course it has to be your left arm - it looks worse than your right one, with less clean white and pink lines and more red and scabbed over ones - complete with a few band-aids from the previous night. It would be better if he was asking, or maybe forcing a response from you, but he's just giving you this concerned look, eyes soft and questioning but not outwardly asking you anything like you wish he would.

"It w-was me," is what you stutter out eventually.

He frowns and looks at your arm again. "You mean you did this to yourself?" he murmurs.

Your stomach aches with anxiety. "I-I know it isn't the best way t-to cope, and I should s-stop but I don't know...I don't know how. I want to say that it helps b-because sometimes it does, l-like when I need to feel something, but what kind of person h-hurts themself to g-get rid of hurt, I know there's gotta be something w-wrong with me..."

He gently takes your arm in both hands.

Your eyes burn, and you suck in a sharp breath, unsure of what he's going to do or say.

"I know that things aren't good right now," he ends up mumbling softly, eyes scanning the damage you've done. "I'm not going to

pretend I understand perfectly but I...I can try to help if you let me."

For a few moments, he looks conflicted on what to do next. He brings his head up to meet your gaze and there's some sort of asking in his eyes, like he wants permission, but you don't know for what; you nod anyways so he knows. He nods back and stays still for a few more quiet moments.

You nearly burst into tears when he leans down, pressing feather-light kisses to the lines that aren't covered.

It's an old cliche, and that doesn't escape you but you'd be lying if you said you didn't appreciate it.

When he pulls away, he traces some of them, like he's trying to memorize them. His dark eyes are heavy with sadness and longing - and you think that for once it's for more than one thing.

Your slow in your reaction, but you know you should say something.

So you offer an explanation, "S-sometimes it's like I'm n-numb and I need something to - to remind me I'm s-still real."

He looks up at you again.

"I know that sounds really w-weird, but I didn't know w-what else to do."

It feels weird, admitting your self-destructive tendencies to someone out loud, but it also feels a little like something's being lifted off your shoulders, like you're letting go of something, and you wonder if this is what you need.

You don't know if you can promise him to stop, but you know that in this moment you'd like to be able to - if it meant he would stop looking at you like he is right now then you would just to see him relax.

But you can't and you know that - so instead you let him hold your arm like this. Then: he brings your hand and presses it to his heart.

You remember the first time he did that, back when you were in the

hospital, waking up like the previous week was all a bad dream. Sometimes if you try hard enough you can pretend it was. You can't hide from it forever though and eventually you're going to have to confront it. You suppose if you have to you don't need to do it alone.

Your vision blurs and sways, and you swipe your free hand over your face.

"I-I don't know how you'd help me y-yet, but if you d-don't mind, that'd...be good. I-I can try to help you too," you manage.

He gives you a weak but true smile, one that actually reaches his eyes...and the dam breaks, again.

You double over in sobs that are distraught-sounding and very very heavy, like it would be enough to bring you to your knees had you been standing. Just like you were wondering when Mike last let himself be open, you think you're doing the same exact thing, because you did say you were similar like that.

He doesn't say anything but pulls you against him, running his fingers soothingly through your hair. Mike isn't helping you because he feels guilted into it. He isn't helping you because he feels indebted to you or Eleven for saving you. Mike's helping you because he cares about you, that's all there is.

It sort of breaks you a little bit, but you think that's okay, because if you had to break, you guess you'd rather it was with someone else. You trust Mike and you know the two of you can do this, no matter how long it takes or how many long tearful talks. You deserve to get better, and so does Mike, so does everyone who suffered because of what happened that week.

Your chest feels a little lighter by the time you run out of tears, sniffling weakly from where your cheek meets the beat of Mike's heart. It's only then that he stops rocking you gently - like Jonathan does, like your mom does - and lays back while patting the spot next to him.

He covers himself with the blanket, and so do you.

Somehow you know that you won't have any nightmares, not if

you're here and you're with Mike, and that thought is enough to assure you as you close your eyes.

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Mike secretly gets you a box of brightly-coloured bandages a week later, telling you that if you want to hurt yourself you could just put one where you *want* to hurt. It's a slow kind of start, but you appreciate that he's trying his best, and over time you realize it does help. There's still some backslicing, but recovery isn't a clean-cut path defined in one way, like people on t.v. say.

Mike's starting to be able to talk to you about her. He's even able to smile as he recounts that week, and you think that this has to be progress on both of your sides.

It may be slow, but it's a start, and that's what matters.